

Power and Moral Leadership: The Case of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

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### Abstract

Personality tests are always excellent tools to determine characteristics for leadership. The adage *absolute power corrupts absolutely*, however, seems to be true from a pathological standpoint. Based on the house in J.K. Rowling's series, *Harry Potter*, this paper explores the pathology of power corrupting and possible reasons for corruption to occur, as well as potential ways to prevent it from occurring. According to the *Harry Potter* personality quizzes, a person falls into the category of Gryffindor (bravery and loyalty), Ravenclaw (wisdom and knowledge), Hufflepuff (inclusion and diversity), or Slytherin (ambition and cunning). These four personalities have an effect on the ease with which a person can be corrupted in a position of power.

*Keywords:* Hogwarts, ethics, moral leadership, accountability

### Power and Moral Leadership: The Case of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry

Not being intimately familiar enough with any businesses in the real world, I have chosen to evaluate the fictional school of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry, created by author J.K. Rowling. There are four houses within this school that students are sorted into at the beginning of their first year. The Sorting Hat places each witch and wizard into a house, based on the student's personality, goals, dreams, and hopes— essentially, *ethics*. The houses are Gryffindor, Ravenclaw, Hufflepuff and Slytherin. This paper will highlight the key traits of each house, provide a critical analysis of Zimbardo's (2006) eleven steps for civic virtue, and discuss three important guidelines regarding the restraint of power that Hogwarts employed.

#### **Hogwarts School**

In order to understand the fictional setting selected, it is important to understand the basic structure of the school and, subsequently, the houses.

#### **Structure**

Hogwarts has a headmaster and four student houses, similar to fraternities. Each house has a professor as its head. The houses form a type of social network for like-minded students. All students of a similar trait are put into the same house and they work and learn together. Zimbardo's (2006) list of promoting civic virtue seems to be part of the natural social structure at Hogwarts. Students and faculty, alike, display many of the concepts that promote civic virtue, and those who do not, demonstrate how easily a person can succumb to darkness, or a lack of morality.

In the *Harry Potter* series, those who are sorted into House Gryffindor are painted as virtuous leaders, while those who are sorted into House Slytherin are painted as vile monsters. In fact, until the final book, the series hammers home the point that those in House Slytherin are

prone to lapses in moral judgement that lead them down the path of the Dark Arts. The books establish Slytherin as the antithesis of morality.

Each house, as well, earns points throughout the school year. These points determine which house wins the House Cup and whose banners fly in the Great Hall. Points are awarded for correct answers, good behavior, and work ethic; points are also taken away for poor behavior or failing to meet expectations of teachers, etc. The points provide a type of accountability, as students are told exactly why they are gaining or losing points, and which student(s) is responsible.

### **Hogwarts Houses**

**Gryffindor.** The founder of Gryffindor house was Godric Gryffindor. He prized bravery, courage, and loyalty above other traits. Gryffindors have a tendency, however, to be mischievous and may or may not follow the rules. They are prone towards egoism when faced with moral dilemmas, though they can be altruistic. Their house seal features a lion, and their colors are red and gold.

**Ravenclaw.** The founder of Ravenclaw house was Rowena Ravenclaw. She prized knowledge and wisdom above other traits. Ravenclaws have a tendency to be very studious and introverted, preferring to spend time with their books, rather than their friends. They are typically heady, and can sometimes be perceived as aloof. They are prone towards following rules and are, therefore, rather principled. Their house seal features an eagle, and their colors are blue and bronze.

**Hufflepuff.** The founder of Hufflepuff house was Helga Hufflepuff. She valued impartiality, loyalty, and tolerance above other traits. As such, a student sorted into Hufflepuff is incredibly patient and has a desire to include as many people as possible. They forge loyal

friendships and tend not to have rivalries. Their house seal features a badger, and their colors are yellow and black.

**Slytherin.** The founder of Slytherin house was Salazar Slytherin. He valued ambition, cleverness, self-preservation, and cunning above other traits. Many wizards and witches from this house turned to the Dark Arts; many from this house, also, are intolerant of those who are of mixed bloodlines (pure wizards and witches mixed with non-magical people). Their house seal features a serpent, and their colors are green and silver.

### **Zimbardo's Steps to Civic Virtue: Analysis**

Lord Acton is oft credited with the quote, "Power corrupts; absolute power corrupts absolutely"; however, the quote is only somewhat accurate (Holmberg & Rothstein, 2015). Lord Acton's quote from a letter in 1887, is, "Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men, even when they exercise influence and not authority: still more when you superadd [sic] the tendency of the certainty of corruption by authority." Acton's thoughts on power, I find, pessimistic, at best. I mention this quote, in particular, however, because it does have a tendency for truth. Holmberg & Rothstein (2015) indicated that Acton referred, primarily, to political situations; however, they also affirmed that power is best used if it can be effectively restrained via systems of control or accountability, much like Zimbardo's (2006) steps to civic virtue.

In these steps, Zimbardo (2006) called for leaders in positions of power to openly acknowledge lapses in judgements, use mindfulness, promote personal responsibility and accountability, refrain from even *small transgressions*, distinguish between just and unjust authority, support critical thinking, reward moral behavior (such as whistleblowing), embrace and respect diversity, reduce social anonymity, challenge conformity, and refuse to sacrifice

crucial freedoms for promises of security. These eleven steps correspond with Holberg & Rothstein's (2015) suggestions for increased accountability. Caulkins et al. (2011) and Blaug (2016) stated that there is more to power corrupting, however, than just a *bad person*, or an immoral act. Rather, it is the force of society and what is seemingly *acceptable* (Caulkins et al., 2011), among other factors. Blaug (2016) cited the diametrically opposed positions of those in power being perceived as overconfident, while the subordinates are perceived to be dependent and disempowered. Blaug (2016) listed four factors that contributed to a *pathology* of corruption; those four factors are an inflation of self, devaluation of subordinates, organizational separation, and a loss of awareness. These four factors compound upon each other and spiral an otherwise good person into a path of corruption (Blaug, 2016).

Zimbardo (2006) offered ways to compensate; however, because, as Caulkins et al. (2011) indicated, corruption of power is not completely an individual agenda, Zimbardo's (2006) ideals may or may not work. As Blaug (2016) implied, it is entirely situational. All researchers, including Wisner and Brown (2015) made it absolutely clear that a social structure of accountability would prevent the wide-spread corruption that tends to follow a person who achieves a position of power, as Zimbardo (2006) suggested.

If Blaug (2016) is correct in stating that corruption comes as a pathological effect of power upon the wielder, then it may be of little use to expect a person in such a position to keep or establish any of the steps Zimbardo (2006) recommended. Keltner, Langner, and Allison (2006) stated that those who are in positions of power rely on their underlings to help preserve reputation. I disagree with this particular theory, as I believe Wisner and Brown (2015) proved in their case study on WorldCom. Those in power tend to have little regard for those in their service

and go as far as to dehumanize them, once the corruption path has been followed and forged (Blaug, 2016).

### **Zimbardo's Steps to Civic Virtue: Hogwarts Application**

In the *Harry Potter* series, many instances arise in which students and teachers, alike, are challenged to display moral courage. In one of the books, Neville Longbottom is awarded points for Gryffindor for being willing to confront Harry, Ron, and Hermione about a situation in which the three were going to break rules, costing Gryffindor points, and potentially, resulting in the students being expelled. In awarding points to the *whistle-blower*, Headmaster Dumbledore applied Zimbardo's (2006) principle of rewarding moral behavior, even stating that it is a difficult choice to stand up for what is right against your friends.

In book 3, *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, Dumbledore gives up a bit of freedom by having the dementors, the guards for the wizard's prison, guarding Hogwarts. These dementors threatened the safety of students and, when one attacked Harry during a Quiddich game, Dumbledore revoked their permission to be on school grounds. He refused to give up the freedoms the students required for the false promise of safety (Zimbardo, 2006).

In the series, Dumbledore is suspended from his position as Headmaster by the Ministry of Magic. In his place, they select a woman named Deloris Umbridge. She comes across as sweet and caring, but is actually part of a plan to paint Harry as attention-seeking, while denying the return of the evil wizard, Lord Voldemort. Through the prior years' teachings and examples set by professors such as McGonagall and Snape, students recognize that, even though she is in a position of authority, she is not entitled to obedience; also, they demand justification for her actions in order to understand from where she is coming with her orders (Zimbardo, 2006).

Because of the structure of Hogwarts with the Houses battling for the House Cup, there is a sense of personal accountability and responsibility placed upon the students to be mindful of themselves, their actions, and their peers (Zimbardo, 2006). Because of this mindfulness, when Draco Malfoy is faced with a moral choice of killing the Headmaster, he follows his conscience and does not do so. According to Keltner, Langner, and Allison (2006), his choice should have increased his and his family's reputation; however, he brought dishonor upon his family and they lost the things they held most dear. Their reputation as dark wizards was tarnished; however, Draco's reputation as moral person began to increase.

House Hufflepuff is the most inclusive house among them all. It is no wonder that this house, above the others, is the least likely to turn to the Dark Arts. Because of their embracing of diversity and their love of including all people, this house is very difficult to tempt towards corruption. The only real example of leadership from Hufflepuff was that of Cedric Diggory, who exemplified the role of leader while still embracing diversity and inclusivity. He understood that Harry was meant to share his position in Tri-Wizard Tournament, even though the other students spoke poorly of Harry. Cedric insisted that he be treated with respect and expressed the difficulty of what Harry would have to do.

In the *Harry Potter* fandom, however, Hufflepuffs are mocked and ridiculed. They are considered lesser than the other houses. Slytherins, especially, seem to have a great dislike for Hufflepuffs. Ambitious, cunning, and self-preserving Slytherins may feel threatened by the friendly, inclusive, and diverse Hufflepuffs. The two houses are, in fact, polar opposites. Where Hufflepuffs are extremely difficult to corrupt, Slytherins are extremely easy. The love of power and the drive to succeed is great among Slytherins. Blaug (2016) drove home the point that corrupted power is pathologic by nature. It is not something one strives for. No one sets out,



planning on becoming a corrupt leader. If there were more emphasis placed upon success as a moral and ethical component, rather than a financial component, as suggested in Kemmerer and Shawver (2007), there may be a greater opportunity for those who are ambitious to become moral and ethical leaders, rather than corrupt leaders. If Draco Malfoy could choose non-conformity to his parents and other dark wizards, then a CFO can choose non-conformity with others of his ilk and not crook the books; but, the environment does need to be conducive (Blaug, 2016; Wisner & Brown, 2015; Zimbardo, 2006).

### **Restraining Power at Hogwarts**

As annoying as Harry, Ron, and Hermione may be in their adventures, they still displayed a good deal of Zimbardo's (2006) ideals for civic virtue. Hill (2006) suggested teaching students of business to think deeply about how they want their role in business to affect society; indeed, one of the core tenants of Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry is developing students to see their potential and understand what their role within the wizarding world will be. Around year 6, the students begin to take their exams to focus in particular areas of study to prepare them for their wizarding jobs. They are encouraged to think about how that role will affect others in the wizarding world, and possibly, the non-wizarding world.

Hill (2006) recommended transparency in policies, referencing the evolution of the black capitalist class in post-apartheid South Africa. By stating clear policies within their *manifesto*, the group was able to challenge the *status quo* and start to make headway in black capitalism. With the transparency of the *points* awarded or taken from the houses, Hogwarts, similarly, established an accountability and personal responsibility within each student. The rules were made exceptionally clear and punishments were viewed as just and appropriate for the actions.

In each book, the trio took on *great evil*, not because they wanted glory for doing so—in fact, Harry Potter had already gained fame by being *The Boy Who Lived*. Instead, they took on the evil, in part, to save Harry's life, but also to protect Hogwarts from the evil they knew to be lurking within the shadows. In a way, Harry, Hermione, and Ron were acting as a type of regulatory committee whose job was to maintain the safety of Hogwarts grounds and students. By the final book, they were able to recruit even Draco Malfoy, the villain of the series, to their cause. Hill (2006) discussed the need to expand the sphere of what others view as acceptable—and by acceptable, what is acceptable to the individual. Hill (2006) offered several questions that probe at the core of being; in the wizarding world of Harry Potter, these questions are asked of the main characters in different ways, many times over.

### **Conclusion**

Though not a perfect comparison for this particular exercise, J.K. Rowling implemented many of the principles discussed in her book series, *Harry Potter*. The houses are the equivalent of personality; I, for example, am Slytherin. It is of utmost importance to analyze, as Hill (2006) suggested, exactly who benefits from the business and who *should* benefit from the business. Often times, Hufflepuffs are the ones who need to bring attention to these issues, forming a sort of accountability committee, as suggested by Zimbardo (2006), Kemmerer and Shawver (2007), Caulkins et al. (2011), and Holmberg and Rothstein (2015). Hogwarts is a beloved, fictional institution and has many lessons to teach the young, as well as the young at heart—even the professional business person.

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